

Camus and Dostoyevsky's Philosophical Challenge – a Strange Spiritual Affinity

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The world of ideas is like a poker game or, to resort to existentialist terminology, appears to be deeply imbued with the illusive yet tangible atmosphere of *contingence*. Both Camus and Sartre were interested in world literature, both were avid readers of novels depicting the *conditio humana*, and did not limit themselves in their reading activities to French, contemporary and classic literary output but included in their perusals works scarcely known as well as those popular at the time (the thirties and early forties of the last century) among a wider public – such literary figures as Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, Shestov or Merezhkovsky – Russian masters of the 19th and 20th century. But first and foremost it was Camus who seems to have followed and sympathized with the unique spirit of the Russian soul with its sense of ensuing absurdity and overwhelming blind chance. The following is a juxtaposition of Camus's understanding of the Russian giant of literature and ideas which were paradoxically close to his understanding and feeling – the views of a Polish Catholic existentialist (Camus's contemporary) Father Woroniecki. Such a "venue" of world views and opinions – irrespective of their ideological and religious foundations – is only possible in the meta-reality of the world of universal (*catholon*) culture. We shall make some references to the works of Merezhkovsky, Shestov and Evdokimov as close intellectual and spiritual allies of Camus.

On the basis of his numerous treatises, we can view Dostoyevsky as an expert on difficult and complicated philosophical-theological problems on the one hand, and on the other – the voice of a priest-tutor, a teacher-patriot constantly caring for and providing appropriate development to the vast masses

of the faithful exposed to nefarious influences over many centuries, the faithful succumbing to degenerate fashion or harmful habits (e.g. sentimentalism, miscomprehended romanticism, relativist attitudes, eudemonistical or materialist stands) which take one far from the authentic dimension of faith. (All these are sings of inauthentic existence in existentialism.)

Many fragments of *Katolicka Etyka* (*Catholic Ethics*)¹ allude directly to the “beyond academic” threads, life situations or even personal recollections, various literary traditions: Romanticism, the Medieval Literature and the modern prose and drama, and are proof of the tremendous sensitivity of the author of *Katolicka Etyka*.

Like Camus, Jacek Woroniecki is deeply interested in the Russian culture, the spiritual impact of Orthodox Church and its practices and rituals. Woroniecki writes: “Dostoyevsky did not quarrel with the Orthodox Church as Tolstoy did. Just the opposite, he was attached to it in a way, as to the mainstay of social order against the gusts of revolution.”² In the fragment discussed we do concentrate on a model, a picture of an individual, just as Woroniecki finds it in the critically presented, but highly evaluated literary *oeuvre* of the Russian writer. As Woroniecki notices, Dostoyevsky’s works denounce a background of literary achievements of Catholic writers, Mauriac’s and Bernanos’s, and a well-known philosopher and theologian – Guardini. It is obvious that the author of *Katolicka Etyka* is deeply aware of the doctrinal differences in strictly religious issues. Knowing perfectly well Dostoyevsky’s extensive literary *oeuvre*, our philosopher presents in a pertinent and interesting way (what is more, in a way still topical in our times) the manners of interpreting that complicated, heterogeneous and dramatic interpretation of man’s paths, that human condition in the confrontation with history and other people, in the struggle with one’s weaknesses and dreams of power and might, which are presented in Dostoyevsky’s works. As far as we are concerned, Woroniecki (as an unusually erudite person) must have acquainted himself with the classical interpretations of the Russian writer’s works presented by the two religious thinkers of the so-called pre-revolution “spirituality.” We mean the works by Merezhkovsky and Shestov,³ published first in Russian (Woroniecki was excellent at Russian), which later (in the thirties) had many translations

¹ See: J. Woroniecki, *Katolicka etyka wychowawcza*, vols. 1, 2, Lublin, KUL, 2000.

² J. Woroniecki, *Chrześcijaństwo powieści Dostojewskiego i Mauriaca*, “Tygodnik Powszechny” 1947, nr 40, s. 4.

³ L. Szestow, *Dostojewski i Nietzsche – filozofia tragedii*, trans. H. Paprocki, Warszawa, Czytelnik, 1994.

into other European languages. It should be mentioned here that the interpretation of Dostoyevsky's literary *oeuvre* is not less of an achievement than the above-mentioned thinkers' *oeuvres*; what is more, it is Woroniecki who focuses on the undiscovered motives in the *oeuvre* of the Russian genius's – the motives which have fascinated many since then, to the present day.

The author of *Katolickość Tomizmu* emphasizes the fact that when it comes to Dostoyevsky as a person and his works, we do undoubtedly deal with a deeply Christian artist, an artist who in an almost visionary way presents his own independent concept of man and his relations with the world and God, achieved thanks to the artistic and theoretical means. The truth is that Woroniecki does not use the word "poliphony" (though his critical texts indicate it explicitly), a term bluntly reflecting human nature captured by the writer. In other words, the protagonists of *The Devils* are all human beings, but of an overturned balance, beings tinged with a certain ambiguity. In the greatest and most everlasting novels by Dostoyevsky we do discern "sick" individuals, knocked out, as it were, of the existence, the people of the underground: reasoning, presenting their (sometimes unclear and irrational) motives of actions, but most of all, we do make out people who hurt themselves and others and experience existential pain.⁴

The criterion that Woroniecki uses in the analysis of human nature is balance, the evenness of a human being which comes from the ontological cooperation of the "elements" man is made of. A man, as we know, in Thomists' view is a being of special significance, a being bearing the duty to strive for certain aims, to fulfill certain tasks (according to Evdokimov,⁵ these are defined tasks, transcendental aspirations). In other words, there are some determined implications of conduct and organizing one's life (on individual as well as on social grounds) arising from the fact of being a compound (an indissoluble one). According to Woroniecki, the disruption, the lack of balance of Dostoyevsky's man (inspired by most virtuous intentions) is caused in many cases by a dramatic negative experience: the loss of freedom or faith, the death of someone close, the incapability of fulfillment in love, loneliness, poverty, and impotence as far as the realization of certain ideals and far-reaching aims is concerned. It all leads to the previously mentioned

⁴ F. Dostoyevsky, *Biesy*, trans. Z. Podgórzec, T. Zagórski, Warszawa, PWN, 1993. See also: *idem*, *Zbrodnia i kara*, *Bracia Karamazow*, *Skrzywdzeni i Poniżeni*, trans. Z. Podgórzec, T. Zagórski, Warszawa, PWN, 1993.

⁵ P. Endokimov, *Gogol i Dostojewski*, trans. A. Kunka, Bydgoszcz, Homini, 2002.

feeling of bitterness, senselessness and existential emptiness, typical of many characters encountered in the novels of the Russian writer.

Analyzing the works of this greatest psychologist of world literature, Woroniecki concentrates on chosen individuals. The motive that we will focus on will be that obvious thing, the disruption of human unity, as well as the doomed-to-failure attempt to restore it. In other words, Woroniecki, being consistent in his Thomistic tenets, interprets Dostoyevsky's message in categories of undisturbed substantiality of faculties (human powers), showing – as it is in the case of the novels' protagonists – that relying on one "force," one side of human nature, leads to disastrous consequences. Let us follow this trail of interpretation. Let us commence from the rational aspect. Woroniecki calls purely rational stands intellectual moralizing. It is the full surrender to the power of *ratio* at the cost of free will, feelings and emotions (e.g. love, compassion). We do discover three classic examples of such an attitude in the rich gallery of Dostoyevsky's moralizing figures. The first stand, presented in the type of novel entitled *Crime and Punishment*, is shown in the existence of Rodion Raskolnikov. This sensitive young man (like other characters in the novels by the author of *The Devils*) deeply experiences the evil of the world. He wants to accomplish something unusual in his life, to act in the name of good for the society, complete law studies, help his family (especially his sister) – in other words, he firmly strives for his goals. However, we have to remember that this is a picture of the tsarist Russia of the second half of the 19th century. Rodion experiences impotence, powerlessness and immense obstacles in achieving his goals. In none of Dostoyevsky's other works can there be found examples of such apt, adequate descriptions of poverty and utter degradation as in the Petersburg presented in *Crime and Punishment*, all that demonstrated in bitter scenes of humiliation of those who have been destined to suffer eternal privations, destined for the lack of any possibilities whatsoever of changing their difficult situations. A brilliant – as well as analytical – interpretation of Raskolnikov reveals itself fully in the article published by the protagonist himself. Rodion presents there a concept of a strong and ruthless individual (an evident anticipation of the Nietzschean superman). This individual is equipped with laws (or he usurps those laws) to decide on the most significant matters (the typical "sacred problems," as Dostoyevsky suggests in one note in *The Diary of the Writer*). Let us then specify this theme by presenting (the seemingly virtuous) reasoning. Raskolnikov comes to the conclusion that a valuable, virtuous individual who strives for certain ideals has got the right, or even obligation, to remove all the obstacles which prevent his self-realization. If one is deprived

of the essentials, if he has to beg the world and his widowed mother for the money he needs, and his penniless sister sacrifices herself by marrying a despicable man, the moral world must be out of order. If, as Dostoyevsky's protagonist understands it, there are people who have been equipped by fate or coincidence with goods which they do not deserve, then one has the ethical permission to take them all away from them. In this manner one can help not only himself but also the others who are in the same situation. Dostoyevsky presents such mercenary moralizing in a superb way. It is the intellect, being at the peak of its power, that views the situation and decides. Not listening to the voice of conscience, killing the elementary emotions, the mind weighs precisely all the arguments for and against the intended action. The conclusion is "stunningly" easy: eliminate in the name of some "good" those social "nits" which cling tightly to the body of the Russian society. Just kill. In the end, then, we do learn about a deliberate crime committed against a usurer and an accidental murder of her sister. Rodion trusted the powers of the reason absolutely: he "balanced" the reasons and made a choice, like a demiurge who decides over life and death. By joining the mind with unlimited freedom, the main character created a rule of proceeding: those who constitute certain obstacles for our or the others' development can be eliminated. The narrative structure of the novel – and Dostoyevsky is a master of constructing such structures – does not bear vacuum, however. Element "A" evokes element "B." In other words, a reasoning is set off against some other one. Thus, Rodion encounters an equal (in the sense of the rational method employed) partner: someone different in essence, composed, equally "moralizing," and using reliable methods of logical exploration. Porfiry – the criminal investigator and prosecutor – does not resort to compulsion nor threats (his image differs from the stereotype notion of a tsarist policeman); he is intelligent, "delicate," subtle, but resolute and consistent. He assumes, stating that people like Rodion are weak by the weakness of those who lost their faith in the sense of existence, in social order, in truths coming from religion or faith. What is more, there is no such a degenerated and spoiled individual that would be devoid of the remnants of conscience. Porfiry's investigations are supported by coincidence: when an innocent man is captured – a fact about which Raskolnikov learns during the process of investigation as a formal witness to the crime – a kind of transformation takes place. If intellect appeared to be so cruel and ruthless (it led to a murder, a senseless crime, a murder which did not solve any problems), then another human power reveals itself to be stronger: the power of self-catharsis, a moral feeling manifested in the pangs of remorse. Dostoyevsky would not have been such an

excellent psychologist, if he had not shown the impact of this power. Raskolnikov belongs to a group of people marked by the disease of being internally torn apart. He will never (after such an action) reach balance, neither physical nor psychological. Suffering, he immerses himself into the gloomy abyss of his visions, delusions, and hallucinations, which are accompanied by the attacks of epilepsy. Raskolnikov is scared as only a man who perceives in full the absurdity of the misdeed he committed can be scared. He would want to get rid of that burden, make a confession, but he cannot find enough strength of will to act. The protagonist cannot do that on his own. According to Dostoyevsky's artistic-moral message, Raskolnikov is an example of a total loss of orientation of the world: the loss of values, truths, emotions and human achievements. Moreover, he is a lonely and alienated individual, waiting for help and rejecting it at the same time – but up to a certain point in his life. In the extensive structure of the presented world, the author of *Crime and Punishment* finds a place for a special kind of help. It is the intervention from the outside, a type of an intervention which plays an extremely significant role in the work in question. The encounter of Rodion and Sonya (a daughter of a lower-rank clerk, an “iconic” alcoholic) seems to be an evident sign of the forthcoming help. Sonya Marmeladova is a woman (whom the society of that time treated as “fallen”) cast away to the deepest levels of the “classless.” This prostitute could have had – as Dostoyevsky suggested – all reasons to abandon the Catholic faith, to give up following the message of caritas. But she does not despise the society that doomed her and her family to incomprehensible poverty and degradation. Nevertheless, Sonya is the exact opposite of that: she does not moralize, she experiences all evil and suffering for the sake of others and her family (especially for her father) and then for the one who does absolutely need help – the accidentally encountered Raskolnikov. Like the evangelical Mary Magdalene, Sonya believes unconditionally that Christ has not forsaken her and will forgive and finally save her. But not only her. Everything that Sonya does (by breaking down the resistance of the society and her family) is achieved in the name of one's neighbor. To our mind, Woroniecki discerns some deeper reason of moral actions in the character of Sonya. The author of *Katolickość Tomizmu* undoubtedly approves of the attitude of spotless and undisturbed faith. Believing in God – Christ – though deprived of such drastic moments as Kierkegaard's leap into the abyss, is said to be, according to our philosopher, supported by the rational reasoning. Despite the fact that Sonya is not an educated person, she has a great respect for knowledge, which is manifested in her acceptance of the permanence and inviolability of ordinary principles, and she respects the principles which

sustain her decent existence even in the gutter. In an act of love and sympathy for Raskolnikov – a murderer, as well as a man who lost his way – she shows him a path of penance and redemption. A very moving scene with the medallion – the image of a saint icon – is mainly interpreted according to the categories of the order to return to the source: God's soil, in front of which one should bow and kiss it. Only in this way – irrational, one would think – a man can retrieve the lost balance, can recover and give up that ambiguous personality so deeply spoiled by the bad attitude of reason, intellect. And though Woroniecki, a follower of Thomas Aquinas's, in many of his works decidedly rejects that superficial sentimentalism and irrational attitude as far as faith is concerned, we can observe on the basis of Dostoyevsky's works discussed here that it is the feeling that is most important (the co-experiencing), not the clear and cool calculation of reason. To put it differently, the consequences of badly applied rationality can be the worst offence against the holiness of life. In this way a man or a woman loses irretrievably his or her being given by God. If Raskolnikov is lost through the wrong perception, characteristic of the "strong," demanding, self-made man, then another of Dostoyevsky's protagonists, Ivan Karamazov, falls into even heavier sin – the sin of excessive pride, which inevitably leads to atheism. It is a highly complicated problem when it comes to the socio-cultural aspect of the 19th-century Russia. If we were to consider atheism with reference to morality and ethics (and that is, according to Woroniecki, of Dostoyevsky's interest), then the denial of the existence of God leads to incalculable consequences. In other words, atheism propagated in Russia among some intellectual, liberal circles eliminates authentic compassion and love. Ivan is the best example of this. If there is no God, then everything is allowed. And in spite of the fact that the protagonist of *The Brothers Karamazov* is a sensitive man – sensitive to the issues of evil, harm and suffering – it is the cool rational calculation that leads him astray. The existence of God cannot be proved; for Ivan the evidence is unobtainable and impossible to grasp with a human mind. And if – as Ivan comprehends it – evil exists, children are starving, wars break out, innocent people are murdered, then there must exist some other premise allowing to confirm oneself in faithlessness: evil, which has spread all over the world so overtly. Dostoyevsky takes issue with what he recognizes as the source of such dangerous convictions. The blame falls on certain degradations of the Church, which had been enslaved by the spirit of rationality and calculation. In a significant fragment of *The Brothers Karamazov* – a story about the Great Inquisitor – we do find a literary interpretation of those difficult and urgent problems. It is not an accident that

Dostoyevsky makes Ivan the creator of that legend, and his brother – Alyosha Karamazov, a young practicing monk – the listener. According to Dostoyevsky (as the legend is a kind of exposition of the author's views), human society can be deluded by various temptations. Christ did not succumb to them (when put to the test), but overpowered those who strove to rule, to gain knowledge and prosperity, thus usurping the right to exercise power over believers. In other words, as this is actually what the parable is about, the man has concentrated on a few mundane aspects of life and lost the power to believe in a pure way. In addition to this, the human being gave freedom away and trusted Satan's message – following the wrong path to sheer power. The symbolic sword, bread and miracles are supposed to substitute real faith, give a poor semblance of happiness and peace. By doing that the man "closes" the path to salvation: he rejects Christ and goes over to evil's side. So, a comprehensively educated liberal, a "western" intellectual, which Ivan surely is, understands the importance of these problems, but is not able to apply this knowledge and help men to regain the lost balance, to wit, combine intellectual and spiritual powers. A different attitude towards the issues of God, faith, salvation and happiness can be found in Alyosha, who exemplifies the model of a lay saint (an ideal of Camus). Young Karamazov is an embodiment of what Woroniecki calls the religious emotion. And though it is not enough to secure full happiness, this authentic side of the human being is approved by Woroniecki. God is alive, present in the world revealing himself in the act of faith. A foster child and a favourite of the holy old man (*staryec*) Zosima, Alyosha is respected by the religious society he is a part of. He is a pure, though inexperienced individual. Zosima, who suffered a lot of evil, who turned away from a worthless life, attempts to spare Alyosha such dramatic experiences. The knowledge the old man gives to the young neophyte concerns the inner harmony of life, as well as the understanding of the others. That is where the saint's attitude – *caritas* – comes from: the love of the neighbor through the love for God. This simple but clear truth becomes powerful when, after his death, Zosima makes his appearance while Alyosha is dreaming about the Wedding at Cana. That symbolic summoning of the young man to the circle of the ones chosen by Christ is an evident sign that the feeling of love (love grounded in faith) is capable of solving the fundamental existential problems. And though Woroniecki cannot (as a Thomist) fully share the same interpretation of an individual's conception, this feeling (strengthened by the evangelical stand) eliminates the mock and self-righteous stand of a moralizer. A cool, calculating mind can lead to terrible mistakes, just as pure, atavistic vitality and impetuosity can, a vitality which is exemplified

in the attitude of the third character of *The Brothers Karamazov*: Dmitri. The eldest of all the brothers, like Kierkegaard's man of esthetics, immerses himself in the abyss of sensual experiences, that sensual directness of experiencing things, elements of passion and unabashed lust of physical love. Nevertheless, such a way of acting is totally destructive. It results in the deepening of that internal state of being torn apart, making the individual a fragile and unstable object which can concentrate only on primeval instincts. The infatuation with a woman's physical beauty (Grushenka), the unlimited desire may lead to the heaviest crimes. Nevertheless, Dmitri, when compared with Ivan, bears much more of a resemblance to a human being: his directness, sincerity, ability to show sympathy for those who have been harmed by life to a greater extent (a dream during the trial), proves undoubtedly similar to experiences of the author of the novel himself. Following this interpretative trail can produce the temptation that the primeval stage of fascination with the element of sheer sensuality can lead to God's forgiveness towards mankind. That is the reason for the existence of the developmental dialectics of an individual (from sensuality through the mind to Christian love) which allows us to think that for Dostoyevsky – a moralist and psychologist – the question of a subject, human being is not only unsolved, but open in the sense that a man is a living hope. This exaggerated pathology of the novel's characters plays, according to Woroniecki, a pedagogical role. Unpredictable, torn, tragic individuals presented in such a brilliant manner are meant to teach us that human existence, exposed to so many perils and dangers, is a task, a moral challenge. In other words, a man has to gain balance of the powers and balance of the goals, emotionally and rationally strive for the height of feelings, cognition, comprehension and action. Strictly speaking, a man has to gain that balance characteristic of a real humanity. Raskolnikov, a man of the underground, Myshkin, Dmitri, Alyosha, and even Stavrogin and Verkhovensky, according to Woroniecki, have the chance to rebuild the human world. They will not create it on the life stage, however, on the stage they are "at this the earthly moment." They have to undergo a kind of conversion, a sudden transformation, a metamorphosis, a re-birth or a moral redemption.

The author of *Katolickość Tomizmu* is a sensitive recipient of that literary message. Despite the evident and unremovable differences in portraying the world as well as in the religious outlook on life, Woroniecki recognizes Dostoyevsky's tragic pessimism mostly as far as the category of a warning is concerned. The discrepancies between the eastern and the western doctrine of the Church are not so vital. In the work of the Russian author Woroniecki discerns a message based on the Gospel which teaches love and understanding.

In one of Dostoyevsky's notes we find a sentence in which the author claims that if he were given the choice between the truth and Christ, he would choose God's Son. This is the only direction which makes human existence meaningful. That is why the reader is so often appalled by the scenes in which lost, blaspheming individuals refer to God. In many dramatic scenes (the conversations between Kirillov and Stavrogin, Rogozhin and Nastasya Filipovna, Sonya and Raskolnikov) the main protagonist assumes the icon that, becomes a sign of unity between what is terrestrial (then prone to evil coming from people and their world) and what is divine. The visual sign of God's presence is addressed even to those who outspokenly negate His existence. For Dostoyevsky, human pride, the will to substitute God by some ideas, desires to be supermen, a strive for absolute freedom, all lead to a fall to "degradation," which means the disappearance of that supernatural element – the Absolute. The dread and drama of human existence, which constitute an integral part of the author's novels, have their counterbalance in the hope of the Re-birth of the individual, in the return to the source for those who got lost, went through the inferno of passions and comprehended in the end that God (hidden among the smallest of this world) has not left them to their own fate.

Although Camus is an atheist – his philosophy of man having been grounded in a specific kind of individualism and heroic humanism – he is far from denouncing all forms of moral transcendentalism. Human condition – *hic et nunc* – is tinged, marked with insoluble, intransigent and intrinsic absurdity. So, in the absence of God, man must resort to the values of his/her invention – the values we are responsible for. But humankind from times immemorial has committed grave mistakes – proposing false solutions and "ways out." According to the French writer, all attempts at overcoming our fate – aesthetic, political or economic – are doomed to failure. It is the overpowering nihilism that is a real threat and menace. But it is the reality where the man tries to replace the other's freedom irrespective of his/her humanity that makes Camus feel enraged. In this vision of the Russian master, especially in *The Devils*, Camus sees the true anticipation of the world to come. He openly states in his famous *The Rebel* that "the totalitarian theocrats of the twentieth century and state terrorism are thus announced. The new aristocracy and the Grand Inquisitors reign to day."⁶ Those nihilistic, oppressive powers (antihuman) insidiously take advantage of the only "positive" power inherent in absurd men: the unity ensuing from the solidarity of saying no, to wit, of rebellion. They (the oppressive powers) make "use of the rebellion

⁶ See: A. Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. A. Bower, London, Penguin Books, 1973, p. 144.

of the oppressed, over one part of your history. Their reign is cruel, but they excuse their cruelty, like the Satan of the romantics, by claiming that it is hard for then to bear (...).⁷ But humanity, irrespective of the varying status – social, economic, educational – of particular individuals, is facing the same fate. We are all in the same boat, underlines Camus at one point. Thus, the oppressors make a horrible mistake; by trying to replace God they are not able to eliminate the inalienable elements of human condition – the lack of essence and freedom, the absurdity in a human situation, total responsibility. All these make us equal in the perspective of human eternity. “A new and somewhat hideous race of martyrs is now born. Their martyrdom consists of consenting to inflict suffering on others, they become the slaves of their own domination. For man to become God, the victim must bow down before the executioner. That is why both victim and executioner are equally despairing. Neither slavery nor power will any longer coincide with happiness, the masters will be morose and the slaves sullen.”⁸

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⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 144.

⁸ *Ibidem*.